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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BASRAH 000138

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SUBJECT: SHAHID AL-MEHRAB EXPLAINS VIEWS, ACTIVITIES

REF: BASRAH 66

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CLASSIFIED BY: Andrea Gastaldo, Deputy Regional Coordinator, REO
Basrah, DOS.

REASON: 1.4 (b)

¶11. (C) Summary. On August 23, the head of the Basrah branch of the Shahid al-Mehrab Islamic organization, Sheikh Diya al-Timimi, hosted the Regional Coordinator and poloff and briefed them about the educational and charitable activities of the group. The sheikh said that Shahid al-Mehrab has 5,000 scholars, of whom 1,500 are women, active in 80 branches throughout Iraq. He explained Shahid al-Mehrab's efforts to educate citizens about the importance of the constitutional referendum and its support for federalism as the political foundation for the new Iraq and denied any connection with Iran.

End Summary.

FOCUS ON ISLAMIC CIVIC EDUCATION

¶12. (C) On August 23, Sheikh Diya al-Timimi, the head of the Basrah branch of Shahid al-Mehrab, received the Regional Coordinator and poloff at his office and briefed them about the educational and charitable activities of the group. The sheikh said that Shahid al-Mehrab is the first entity to spread Islamic culture and religion throughout the country and has more than 5,000 scholars, of whom 1,500 are women, active in 80 branches in Iraq. The group spreads the spiritual teachings of Ayatollah Ali Sistani about moderation, tolerance of other opinions, and self-control with the goal of creating a new society to replace the oppressive dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, according to Sheikh al-Timimi. He added that Shahid al-Mehrab is under the leadership of Secretary General Sayed Amar al-Hakim and disclaimed any connection with the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) or with Iran.

¶13. (C) Asked about Shahid al-Mehrab's civic education work, the sheikh said in the run-up to the national referendum on the constitution, the 5,000 Shahid al-Mehrab scholars went to great lengths to inform the public about the benefits of the document.

In Basrah, 3 million people attended 250 meetings convened in mosques to explain what was at stake in the referendum, according to the sheikh. Asked if Shahid al-Mehrab would encourage people to vote in the coming provincial elections, the sheikh demurred, saying consultations first were needed with the secretary general. He said that Shahid al-Mehrab's main goal is

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to see "good people" in office and avoid a return of dictatorship, an allusion to widespread disillusionment with the

rampant violence and corruption practiced by the political parties that currently control Basrah. The sheikh said that Shahid al-Mehrab has a duty to educate the people, but the people have the right to choose for themselves.

SHAHID AL-MEHRAB: FEDERALISM AND THE COALITION

¶ 14. (C) Sheikh al-Timimi declared Shahid al-Mehrab's firm support for federalism as the basis for peace in the new Iraq. Because of the long history of oppression of Iraqi Shias, the nine predominantly Shia provinces south and southeast of Baghdad (Basrah, Dhi Qar, Maysan, Muthanna, Najaf, Karbala, Qadisiyah, Babil and Wasit) need to band together in what the sheikh called "a large, strong" Shia entity. He said that Shahid al-Mehrab has no problems with other political parties, only with militias. He welcomed the presence of the Coalition Forces in Iraq as a stabilizing influence at a time that Iraqi security forces are unequal to their tasks. He added that Shahid al-Mehrab wants to see Iraq have good relations with all its neighbors without outside interference.

CHARITABLE ACTIVITIES

¶ 15. (C) Sheikh al-Timimi reported that another of Shahid al-Mehrab's activities is support of orphans and displaced Shia families who have fled ethnic cleansing in the north (see reftel). In Basrah, he said, 2,400 orphans receive monthly allowances. He added that Shahid al-Mehrab, which was established in 2003, is attracting new adherents because many people are persuaded of the value of its work at Friday mosque sermons. He said that Shahid al-Mehrab's funding comes largely from Zakat, the charitable contributions that Islam requires of its followers. He said that businessmen in the Gulf also make significant contributions.

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¶ 16. (C) Comment. In its three years of existence, Shahid al-Mehrab has quietly spread its Islamic educational agenda and civic action programs - along with the construction of 500 mosques that serve as pulpits for its adherents - throughout Iraq. It operates as a well-organized and well-funded mouthpiece for SCIRI in southern Iraq. Despite Sheikh al-Timimi's assertion that Shahid al-Mehrab is not connected to SCIRI, there is no doubt that the two organizations are closely linked. Sheikh al-Timimi's hard to swallow contention that Shahid al-Mehrab has no ties to Iran is similarly incredulous. Direct and substantial funding from Iran is an open secret. Shahid al-Mehrab's ability to spread its orthodoxy on key issues - such as its view on federalism - could be the deciding influence for voters in the south. End Comment.

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